***‘Year of Wonders* is a story of great courage in the face of extreme adversity.’ Discuss**

In the 17th century village of Eyam, as two-thirds of their fellow villagers were struck down by the deadly plague, villagers responded in diverse ways. Geraldine Brooks’ depiction of the great courage shown by a serving girl, narrator and protagonist Anna Frith, the rector’s wife and friend to Anna, Elinor Mompellion, and the rector Michael Mompellion is in stark contrast to the less courageous responses of other characters. The selfishness and abrogation of responsibility of Colonel Bradford, the ‘thefts’ of Anna’s parents, Josiah and Aphra Bont and murders of village healers Mem and Anys Gowdie by the grieving mob of villagers all demonstrate that in times of great adversity some sink to the very base instincts of self-interest, survival and superstition.

Anna Frith’s character, as introduced to readers in the prologue in Leaf fall 1666, is strong and resilient. She says of herself that she is a ‘woman who has faced more terrors than many warriors’. Stepping back in time to the Spring, 1665 Brooks begins to outline the events of the plague year that enabled Anna to ‘shine’ and become the young woman who has faced the terrors of the mob, midwifery and mining. Instead of joining the grieving mob who attacked Mem and Anys Gowdie, the town healers, accusing them of being witches and blaming them for their losses to the plague, Anna fights with all her strength to bring the crowd to their senses. With her own ‘babies .. rotting in the ground’ she too could have given in to the superstitions of her time and sought revenge by blaming the ‘witches’ but she chose the harder way and was bruised and battered for having done so.

With the death of their midwife Mem Gowdie, village women were at risk of losing their own, and the lives of their babies, should there be any complications. Elinor Mompellion, with her compassionate nature, appeals to Anna to assist with the delivery of Mary Daniels’ baby after husband Randoll asked for help. Reluctant, having seen her mother mutilated by a barber surgeon who was called in to ‘help’ deliver her younger sister, Anna still goes with Elinor and delivers Mary of a healthy baby boy. In their ‘season of death’ they ‘celebrated a life’ thanks to her great courage.

Perhaps the greatest test of Anna’s courage was that of first questioning the mining traditions of the time when Merry Wickford seems set to lose her family mine to David Burton. This neighbouring miner had nicked the spindle of her stowe twice and in a ‘sennight’ he could do it again and the mine would be his. Her real courage shows when she chooses to turn that questioning into action. She knew by raising the issue with Elinor that she was committing to facing her greatest fear – going down into a mine. Having prepared the body of her husband Sam, who was killed in a mining accident for his burial, and even before then admitted to her fear of the mines, it was with amazing strength of character that she faced that fear in order to be able to ensure the financial future of the orphaned Merry by bring a pan of lead to the Barmester, allowing the child to ‘retain the rights over Burning Drake vein’.

Anna’s attempt to save the Gowdies, her work as a midwife and facing her demons down the mine for Merry are the outward signs that Brooks gives readers of the courage that Anna Frith shows during the plague year. However, her inner transformation from that timid girl who would have let Elizabeth wait at the front door of the rectory while she went around the back and then opened the front door for her ‘better’, to the woman who handed the haughty Elizabeth Bradford back the reins as she strode in ahead of her to help Mrs. Bradford deliver her daughter, shows even greater courage. At a time when class distinctions were so ingrained, that the ‘men still doffed their caps and women curtsied’ when the Bradfords pass as they abandon them, it shows courage that Anna defies social norms to learn to read, to study with Elinor, the ways to help others using the Gowdies’ herb garden and existing medical books. It took even greater courage to throw the poppy resin into the fire, rejecting its slumber in favour of a life in service of others. To rescue the Bradford bastard, reject Michael and set out to make a new life for her and her girls Aisha and Elinor and marry and work with the Ahmed Bey may seem to some readers to not fit with the times Anna Frith lived in. However, everything Brooks has allowed us to observe about this courageous young woman whilst facing extreme adversity during the plague year, suggests that the strength she has shown then would allow her to overcome the challenges to be faced in the new city, country, language, religion and traditions of her new life in Oran.

*Year of Wonders* is not a one character story. Anna’s courage may be outstanding but others in Eyam also more than rise to the occasion in the plague year. Elinor Mompellion provides the teaching, encouragement and support that make many of Anna’s feats of courage possible. Without Elinor’s compassion to serve others and her non-judgmental approach to all she comes into contact with, she and Anna would not have found themselves is a position to help others so freely. Elinor’s courage shines in the many ways she steps out of her expected role as a member of a more privileged class and the rector’s wife. Her determination to find a way to ‘defeat the plague’ by ‘nourish[ing] those who remain healthy’ sees her tirelessly seeking remedies and delivering these to the suffering therefore exposing herself to the contagion that kills so many of the villagers. Her courage extends to frankly disclosing to Anna the sins of her past even though she was not convinced that Anna would not judge her. ‘…now that you know everything, will you still work with me?’

Elinor’s husband, the rector Michael Mompellion, faces the plague year with great courage and an overwhelming sense of responsibility. From the time of the dinner at the Bradford Hall when the Colonel makes it clear that he would take his family and flee, just as upper class members of society have when the plague hit London, Mompellion made it clear that he would have faith and ‘stand and face the lion’. In preaching the sermon to encourage his congregation to protect their fellow man by quarantining the village, he promises that ‘while I am spared no one in this village will face their death alone.’ He delivers on this promise to the point of physical exhaustion, especially after taking on the grave digger as well when the sexton dies. In all this he exposes himself, and his much loved wife to the contagion. Still his faith holds, and on his advice to burn all their goods, can be accredited with the ending of the spread of the plague within the village. In the prologue Brooks, through her narrator Anna, who remains to care for Michael following Elinor’s murder, shows readers a broken man, exhausted in his body and faith who rejects all offers of assistance. For Mompellion the story does not end there. In farewelling Anna he admits that he has been reminded what ‘his duties are’ and despite having lost his own zealous faith he will seek ‘to bring comfort’ to those in the village who still believe. In doing so, and providing Anna with the means to leave swiftly and safely, Brooks shows this character’s response to adversity is indeed worthy.

Not all of the villagers were able to respond in such a courageous or worthy manner. Josiah Bont, on being bribed with one of Anna’s sheep to take on the role of grave digger, to spare the exhausted Mompellion, does so not as a public service but as a means to line his pockets. Digging outside the houses of the dying, within their hearing, and then fleecing the grieving families of their precious possessions in payment was mean spirited. However his response to adversity sunk to a new low when he attacked Christopher Unwin in his sleep and buried him alive so that he could help himself to the Unwin possessions. His wife Aphra, Anna’s stepmother, used the suffering and superstition of her fellow villagers to exploit them by selling ‘charms’ and ‘remedies’ disguised as the ghost of Anys Gowdie which they purchased in their desperation to protect their loved ones. Upon losing her husband to his punishment for theft, and her children to the plague, her mind to her inhumane treatment at the hands of Brand and Robert Snee, and finally the loss of her last child, Faith, Aphra responds to her extreme adversity by turning to superstition and finally murder and suicide. Together with that of the mob who attacked the Gowdies, these very different responses to the extremely adverse conditions of grief, fear, and searching for someone or thing to blame during the plague year, whilst not worthy may be explained by Brooks’ portrayal of their lives as being lives of great loss and little understanding of its cause.

In any period of history when people are faced with times of extreme adversity, whether it be war, disease, fire or flood, they will respond in different ways. The courage of those who make many sacrifices to support the victims stand out as the best examples of humanity, as do Anna Frith, Elinor and Michael Mompellion. No matter what the occasion there will also be those who see these circumstances as only opportunities to put themselves and their interests first, as do the Bradfords, the grieving mob and Josiah and Aphra Bont. It all depends on whether their values fit with the opening words of Mompellions’ Sunday Oath sermon, ‘‘Greater love no man hath, that he lay down his life for a friend’ or with Colonel Bradford’s outlook, “I am merely doing what any man of means and sense must do: safeguarding what is mine.”

C. te Lindert.